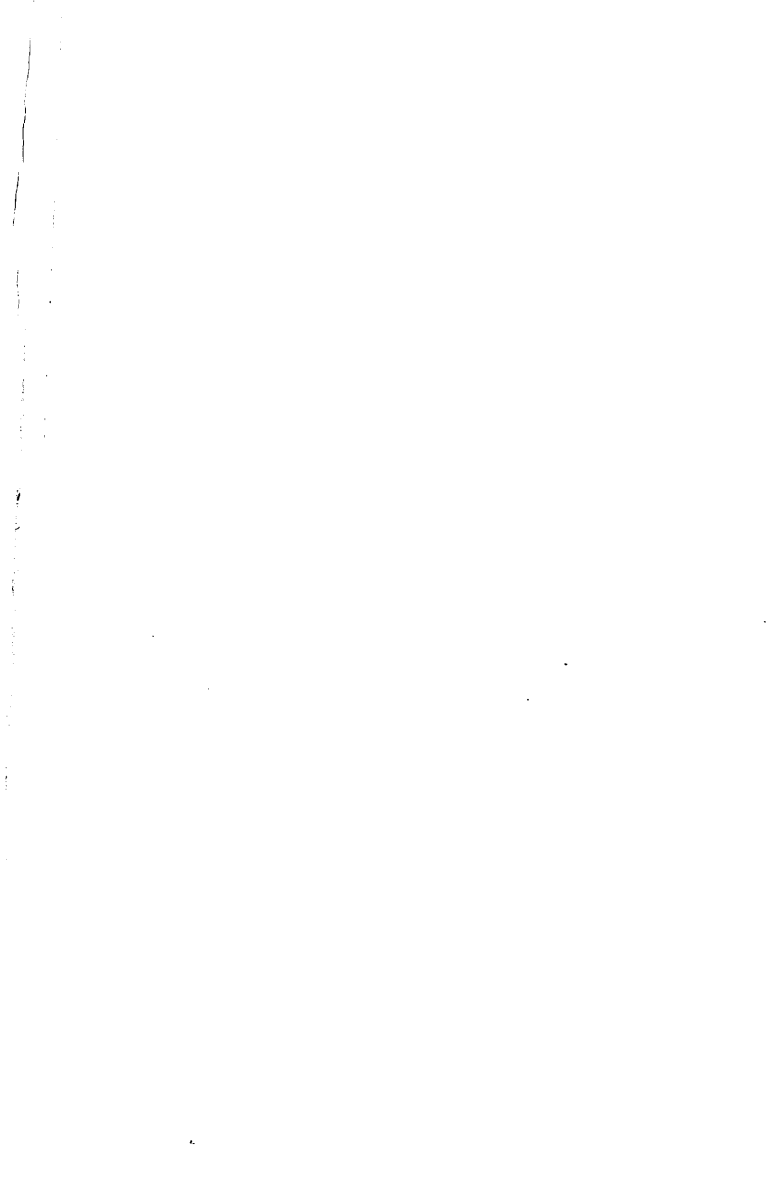


A black rectangular label with a white double-line border. The text "THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO LIBRARY" is printed in white, all-caps, serif font, centered within the label.

THE
UNIVERSITY
OF CHICAGO
LIBRARY



PRAYER FOR ALL CHRISTIANS

BY
BEDE FROST
“

A. R. MOWBRAY & Co. LIMITED
LONDON AND OXFORD
MOREHOUSE-GORHAM CO.
NEW YORK

Printed in Great Britain

BV 215

.F9

First published in 1939



Dio

FOREWORD

THE first five chapters of this book contain the substance of a Lent course preached in the Church of S. Gabriel, Pimlico, and of set purpose, something of the colloquial manner in which they were delivered has been retained. The last chapter has been added for those who have made some progress in prayer and who, not uncommonly, meet with the difficulties therein described and elucidated. But the rest of the book has to do with the prayer of ordinary Christians who desire to pray well and yet are often unfamiliar with what ought to be known if they are to do so. To live a Christian life without prayer is impossible. To pray without knowledge of, or attention to, the conditions of Christian prayer can only lead to disappointment and to the temptation to give

up praying. What is worth doing is worth doing well, and just as the Church would have us 'believe rightly,' so she would have us pray rightly, that the true purpose of our prayer may be accomplished.

BEDE FROST

CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. WHAT IS CHRISTIAN PRAYER? - -	9
II. WHY OUGHT WE TO PRAY? - -	26
III. THE PRAYER OF PETITION - -	48
IV. MENTAL PRAYER - - -	68
V. WHAT MAKES A GOOD PRAYER? -	86
VI. PROGRESS IN PRAYER - - -	103

PRAYER FOR ALL CHRISTIANS

I

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN PRAYER?

'And it came to pass, that, as He was praying in a certain place, when He had ceased, one of His disciples said unto Him, Lord, teach us to pray.'—S. LUKE xi. 1.

I WONDER whether it has ever struck you that there was something rather strange in that request. For the disciples of our Lord were not men who knew nothing about prayer, or were indifferent to, and careless about, the practice of it. They were believers in God; they were familiar with the teaching of the Old Testament Scriptures about prayer; they belonged to a praying race; they frequented the public prayers of the synagogue and, no doubt, went up to

Jerusalem to worship and pray at the great feasts.

What was it, then, that prompted this request? Well, first of all, the fact that they had seen our Lord at His prayer and had noticed that there was something about it which was different from the prayer of others. Probably they could not have expressed that difference in words, but they felt it as a real difference. It gave them the impression that there was something about the prayer of Jesus which was wanting in their prayer, and that they ought to know what this was in order that their prayer might be like His.

We may understand this better if we remember that we may have been in the habit of doing some particular thing for many years in a particular way. Then, one day, we have seen some one else doing the same thing in a different way, and with much better results. So we have said, 'Do show me how to do it like that.' That is what this disciple meant. 'Teach us to pray as You pray.'

There was another thing which led to this request. Seeing our Lord praying, the disciples could hardly help remembering some of the things which He had taught them about prayer. Such teaching is to be found all through the Gospels, but the essence of it is contained in that collection of our Lord's sayings which we know as the Sermon on the Mount.

First, our Lord teaches that prayer is an act of direct, personal intercourse and communion of man with God. 'When thou prayest, enter into thy closet,' that is, your own private chamber, 'and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father Who is in secret; and thy Father Who seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.' We must remember that our Lord is here talking about private not public worship and prayer, such as that in which He was accustomed to take part both in the synagogue and in the Temple; and also, that He was not condemning or forbidding our saying our private prayers in church, or even out of doors, as many of the saints loved to do. What He

condemned in those whom He called 'hypocrites' was not that they prayed in the streets but that they did so 'that they may be seen of men.' There are large numbers of people who have little or no privacy in which to pray except in church or out of doors, and they should take advantage of open churches or of quiet spots in which to pray. Most, if not all, of our Lord's praying was done out of doors, in secluded places and in the silence of the night, and we are told that the great contemplative, S. John of the Cross, used to lead his novices to some beautiful spot in order that they might pray there. The essence of prayer is to be alone with God, in a loving attention to Him, waiting upon Him, as Holy Scripture so often says.

Then, further, Jesus teaches that prayer consists of the desire of the heart, not of the words we may use. 'When ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye, therefore, like unto them; for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask Him.' Notice

that our Lord does not forbid repetitions in prayer, but only 'vain' or empty ones. We remember that He Himself used repetitions in His prayer in the Garden, 'saying the same words,' and this is often much better than saying a great many different words, as if our desire needed to be annotated and expressed in a variety of ways instead of being put simply and repeatedly before God.

But it may be asked, 'If God knows our desires before we put them into words, as our Lord teaches, why should we pray at all?' There are two principal reasons.

1. In order that we may not forget, but may constantly acknowledge, the fact of our utter dependence upon God. We do not pray in order to remind God, but to remind ourselves both of what we are and of what we need. It is so easy for us to forget this dependence upon God, to forget that we are, as S. Augustine says, always leaning over into that abyss of nothingness from which God created us, that each moment of our lives is dependent upon our being kept in existence by God, in Whom 'we live and

move and have our being.' So easy, too, for us to forget that we owe everything we are and possess to God, that we have literally nothing of our own except our badness, and that God alone can and does supply all our needs both of soul and body. So we are to pray in order that we may remember our place, our condition, and our relation to God.

2. We are to pray because God has made prayer the condition of our receiving His gifts. This is not simply an arbitrary condition; there is a very good reason for it. We all know that to give things to people who cannot or will not appreciate and use them is both to waste those things and possibly to harm those to whom they are given. A person must not only need a thing but also want it, and know how to use it, before it is of real use to him. So God, Who wills to give all that we need, desires that we shall see our need, and beg Him to supply it. For this reason, too, He sometimes delays in answering our prayer because we do not really want what we have prayed

for, and the delay deepens both our sense of our need and our desire, so that our hearts are more widely opened to receive and to make use of His gifts.

Even more essential to prayer is the truth that we are not to be chiefly occupied in asking for all sorts of things, especially those particularly concerned with the temporal order, for, says our Lord, 'after all these things do the Gentiles seek. . . . But seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.' For the main purpose of prayer is not that we may *get* something, but that we may *become* something that we are not. 'Be perfect,' our Lord bids us, and prayer is one of the chief means of becoming perfect, for in prayer what we are to seek most is that we may be united to God, become more closely conformed to His holy will.

We must never think of prayer as an attempt on our part to change the divine will, to persuade or cajole God to do what we want. The will of God is unalterable and unchangeable, as Holy Scripture de-

clares, and all our good consists in knowing and doing that will which cannot desire aught but what is supremely best for us ; as the Apostle says, 'All things work together for good to them that love God.' It is true that we cannot always see this, nor must we expect to do so, since 'we walk by faith, not by sight,' and faith is most truly faith when we cannot see but can only say, with Job, 'Though He slay me, yet will I put my trust in Him.'

But, you may say, if the will of God is unchangeable, must there not be many occasions when prayer is quite useless? If, for example, a man knows that his wife or child is dying, what is the good of praying that their lives may be spared? None at all, if you really know that immediate death is inevitable, but much good if, even despite appearances, you are not sure. And even when it is certain, there is still much to pray for both for those who are near to death and for oneself. The example of our Lord on the eve of His Passion shows us that we may pray that, if it is possible, we may be

spared some great suffering which confronts us, but always with an entire submission to the divine will. And always we need to pray for strength to endure that which God allows for our good.

We can now see what it was that caused the disciple to say, 'Lord, teach us to pray.' First, because our Lord's prayer was different from the prayer of others, and secondly, because of what He had taught them about prayer. Thus it is necessary for us to see that Christian prayer is different in kind from the prayer of a non-Christian, or in other words, that only a Christian can pray Christianly. That does not mean that no one but a Christian can pray, for any one who believes in God can and ought to pray. But it means that there is a real difference between Christian prayer and, say, Muslim, Buddhist, or Taoist prayer. This difference lies in and derives from what a Christian is.

A Christian is one who has been made a member of Christ in Baptism. The term 'Christian' cannot be, and ought not to be, applied to any one on the ground that he is

good, honest, virtuous, kind, and so on; for an atheist, a Muslim, a Buddhist may be these, since these natural virtues are possible to, and to be expected of, all men. But none of these virtues makes any one a Christian, nor can a man make himself one by the practice of them. Not even going to church or any religious practices are sufficient, a man can no more make himself a Christian than he can cause himself to be born. For as Jesus Christ tells us, to become a Christian it is necessary to be 'born again of water and of the Holy Spirit.' It is to receive a new life; to be made 'a partaker of the divine nature,' that is, of the divine life and activity; it is to be made a son of God by the act of God Himself; to receive something which we have not got by nature, as S. John says, 'As many as received Him to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them which believe on His Name; which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.' To be a Christian is to have been raised to a supernatural state, to have been united to

Jesus Christ in such a way that we share in, and live by, His life as truly as the branches of a tree live by the life of the tree. 'I am the true vine,' says our Lord, 'ye are the branches'; only as such, abiding in union with Him, are we Christian. Or, as S. Paul puts it, to be a Christian is to be 'in Christ,' a member of His Body, one who can say, 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.'

Thus the Christian life is the living continuation in each of the members of His Body of the life of Christ, it is the going on in time of what Jesus 'began to do and to teach.' Much more might be said about this truth of the Christian life, but if you start with what has been said and read your New Testament, you will find it confirmed and amplified on almost every page. What we have to see now is what it means in relation to prayer.

It means that Christian prayer is the continuation of the prayer of Christ. Our prayer must be like our Lord's prayer; in nothing is it more necessary that we should follow His example. This is, indeed, what

is meant by praying in His Name, as when He says, 'Whatsoever ye shall ask in My Name, that will I do.' He does not say, as many people imagine, 'Anything you ask I will do it,' but, 'Whatsoever ye ask *in My Name*,' that is, in My Person, as one with Me. For in Holy Scripture the name of a person stands for the person himself, a fact with which the Jews were so much impressed that they seldom used the Name of God directly. The true meaning of the words just quoted is emphasized by our Lord when He says, 'If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.' For the more we abide in Him and keep His commandments, desiring, as we pray, that His will may be done, the more we shall pray according to His will.

To pray, then, as Christians, we must look for the essence of our Lord's prayer and make it our own. This lay, first, in His relation to His eternal Father, and was the expression of that relation. In all the recorded prayers of Jesus we read that He spoke to God as His Father, and that when

He is speaking of His Father to others, He nearly always does so as, 'My Father,' whereas He bids us say, 'Our Father.' For He was the Son of God in a unique sense, Son of God by nature, the only and eternally-begotten Son of God; not merely *a* son of God as each Christian is by grace, but *the* Son of God as no one else is or could be. So His prayer is the expression of this Sonship, a prayer of most intimate communion in which He was all at one with His eternal Father. In our relation with God our Father there is a difference of nature and also one caused by the fact of sin, and both these determine the character of our prayer. But neither of them existed in our Lord, for He was, as we say in the Creed, 'of one substance [that is, nature] with the Father' and 'in Him was no sin.' His prayer was prayer at its highest, the prayer of adoration, of filial fear, as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews says, that 'in the days of His flesh when He had offered up prayers and supplications . . . He was heard in that He feared,' which means, as you may see in

the margin, 'for His piety.' Sometimes His prayer is spoken of as 'the prayer of God,' not 'prayer to God' (that 'to' is an error in translation); sometimes as one of thanksgiving, 'I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes,' or as at the grave of Lazarus when He said, 'Father, I thank Thee that Thou hast heard Me. And I knew that Thou hearest Me always.' Then we have His prayer of submission to His Father's will in Gethsemane, His prayer for His enemies on the Cross, and that most beautiful prayer recorded in the seventeenth chapter of S. John. And in all we see the expression of His Sonship, which was the stay and secret of the whole of His life on earth.

The second characteristic of His prayer was that it was all directed toward, and centred round, the will of His Father. This, of course, was the motive power of His whole divine-human life amongst men. 'I came not to do Mine own will but the will of Him Who sent Me.' His 'Not My will but Thine

be done' was not an act of sad resignation to the inevitable, but a joyful acceptance in which all His natural, human shrinking from the Passion was welcomed and willed by Him in union with the will of His Father.

Thirdly, in Him prayer and life were one. He had special times and acts of prayer, as we must have; but the whole of His life was a prayer, as ours is meant to become. For to pray is to will and do what God wills and would have us do in every moment of our lives; it is to have ourselves turned toward God, directed toward Him, centred in Him in all that we are and do. It is to see and to obey the will of God as our Lord did, whether it comes to us through His commandments or in all the circumstances of our daily lives. In our actual times of prayer we seek to know God and His will, and so to become, by His grace, one with it, that we may fulfil it outside our prayer-time, living as we pray. Of that we shall think later.

Now let us gather up one practical conclusion from what has been said. It is this, prayer must always begin with God and not

with ourselves. Our Lord taught us this when He answered the disciple's 'Lord, teach us to pray.' 'He said unto them, When ye pray, say, Our Father, Who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth.' You see, it is all about God, His Name (that is, Himself), His kingdom, His will. And only then, when we have paid attention, reverence, expressed our desire for His kingdom, His rule, and His will, are we to come to ourselves. 'Give us this day our daily bread. . . .' And why are we to ask for these things? Because they are necessary in order that we may know, love, and serve Him as we ought in this life.

So the first act of all prayer should be the placing of ourselves in the presence of God, an act of conscious recollection of our Father in heaven.

Then an act of adoration, praise, reverence, and thanksgiving. Then the uniting of ourselves with our Lord's desire for the establishment of the kingdom of God and for the accomplishment of His will on earth.

And when we have done this, then we may go on to such petitions and intercessions as our needs and those of others demand.

I want you to begin to do that at once if you have not done it before. There is much more to be said about it, but enough has been said to enable you to begin without delay. Remember that every time you put off doing what you know you ought to do, it becomes harder to begin. You can learn to pray only by praying. And what is the good of your listening to, or reading, advice about prayer unless you try to put it into practice?

II

WHY OUGHT WE TO PRAY?

‘He spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint.’—S. LUKE xviii. 1.

THE parable which follows is concerned with perseverance in prayer, but what I want you to notice is the word ‘ought.’ ‘Men ought always to pray.’ Why? What is the main object and purpose of prayer? What chief end should we have in mind when we pray?

Two reasons for prayer have been given already. First, that we may acknowledge our creaturely dependence upon God, that we may remember our condition, our place, our relation to God. Secondly, because God has made prayer the condition of our receiving His gifts. But there is an even greater reason why men ought to pray, and it is this main purpose of prayer which we must now

consider. It is the same purpose and end as that which should be the one end of all the exercises of our religious practice.

It is true that each of the practices of religion has a particular end of its own, and also that there are different kinds of prayer, each having a particular purpose in view. There is the prayer of adoration in which we prostrate our whole being in worship; the prayer of praise in which we acknowledge the majesty, the goodness, the power, the love, and other attributes of God; the prayer of admiration, of praising God for what He is and does. The Psalms are full of such prayer, as indeed, too, of the prayer of thanksgiving, of offering oneself to God, of penitence, of supplication, petition, and intercession. But what I am asking is, what is the final end and purpose, the one supreme thing that prayer, together with all the acts of religion, is meant to bring about? The answer is, to unite us in a loving sonship with God, and so in a right Christian relationship with one another. If our belief in, and practice of, our religion is not leading

and contributing to this end, there is something wrong with it. Not, of course, something wrong with religion itself, but with our attitude to, and practice of, it. We must beware of the not uncommon error of attributing our own faults to the religion we profess. The better a thing is the more easily it may be misused, but it is foolish to blame the thing for our own failure to use it rightly.

The main object of the Christian religion is to bring men into a living sonship with God, and so into a right relationship with one another. Our Lord has made that plain in His approval of the lawyer's reiteration of the two great commandments. 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind: and thy neighbour as thyself.' 'Thou hast answered right: this do and thou shalt live,' and it is of eternal life that our Lord speaks. But we cannot fulfil these commandments by ourselves, that is, by the use of our natural faculties and resources.

This inability, due both to a deficiency of our nature and to the fact of sin which has weakened the good of that nature, needs to be emphasized since, as the Archbishop of York has reminded us recently, we English 'have a perpetual tendency' to forget or deny it. For it was a British monk named Pelagius who, in the sixth century, invented the heresy that man was capable of keeping the commandments of God by his own power, and that our Lord was only an example to us, not a Saviour by Whom we are given the grace which alone enables us to know, love, and serve God. The natural temperament of the average Englishman inclines him toward this very un-Christian belief, which the Archbishop has said he regards 'as of all heresies spiritually the most pernicious.' It is so because it denies both the insufficiency of our nature and our need of divine grace, and contradicts our Lord's words, 'Without Me ye can do nothing,' and the whole teaching of the New Testament which insists that 'we are saved by grace.'

In order that we may come into union

with God we need two things. First, to be shown what God is and wills; and secondly, to be given His aid to believe in Him and to do His will. It was for this purpose that the Eternal Word 'was made flesh, and dwelt among us,' so that 'as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God.' Our Lord is not simply an example to us, for however true and good an example may be, it does not give us the power to copy it. And that is what we need. A man may be attracted toward some great thing so that he earnestly desires to attain it. He may be fired with the ambition to climb high mountains, to paint beautiful pictures, or to become a great musician. But he may be prevented from doing any one of these things by some deficiency in his nature, and such a deficiency cannot always be overcome. However much a man may want to climb mountains, his bodily health or his lack of means, time, and opportunity may make it impossible. Great as may be his desire to become an outstanding painter or musician, he may lack just that gift, that touch of

genius, which makes it possible, and which even hard work will not supply.

So is it with the desire to come into union with God. For that we need both to be shown how to do it and to be given help to do it. So S. John says, 'Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ,' and our Lord, 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no man cometh unto the Father but by Me.' The Christian religion teaches us what the truth is, and gives us the grace we need to believe and to obey that truth. Everything the Church does is directed toward the one end of bringing us into the union of loving sonship with God. For the Church is the Body of Christ, in and through which all that Jesus 'began to do and to teach' is carried on in this world. And prayer is the chief way by which all the truth and grace given to us become our very own, are woven, as it were, into the very substance of our being and life.

To say that prayer is the most important practice of our religion is not to question the primacy of worship or the essential need of the Sacraments. It is only to say that it is

the one thing which is always actually within our power, the one thing which we can do at any time, and also that unless we really pray, neither the truth we are taught nor the grace we receive will be assimilated and bring forth fruit in our lives.

God is our life, 'in Whom we live and move and have our being,' so that without Him we should cease to be. He is our life in a much greater sense than He is the life of all the other things of creation. The rest of the animal world needs only what is necessary for the body. But we need food for our minds and wills, since we are more than body, we who are created in 'the image and likeness of God,' which image and likeness is in our mind and will, the highest faculties of our spiritual nature. Mind and will are not powers of the body, but of the soul—a dead body cannot think or will because it has lost the soul which enabled all its thinking and willing.

So says our Lord, 'Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.' For every

word of God is a living word, doing what it says, causing life in our souls, uniting us to Him Whose words 'are spirit and are life.' Our minds are fed with the divine truth, our whole being with divine grace; from the moment of our Baptism wherein God made us His children, we are constantly and in many different ways being fed and nourished with the heavenly food of the Word of God. The Sacraments are the chief means by which we are made 'partakers of the divine nature,' to use S. Peter's words, by which he means partakers of the divine life and activity. But the Sacraments are of little use without prayer, in much the same way that food, however good in itself, is useless and even harmful to us when we cannot digest it. Just as the digestive organs cause the food we eat to be good for our bodies, so prayer is the chief means by which the spiritual food of divine grace aids us to grow in the Christian life of union with God.

You see, then, that the chief object of prayer is not to get something, but that we may become something. That is our Lord's

teaching. Do not be, He says, like the Gentiles (that is, the heathen), making your prayer a continual seeking after the things of this life, do not centre your prayer upon your temporal needs. 'But seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.' The essence of Christian prayer lies in seeking God 'that your soul may live.' For nothing but God is our life, and God must be sought for His own sake, because He is God, because, too, we cannot live without Him—live, that is, as men and women, not simply as animals who are bodies only.

By praying aright we become what God would have us be, for to pray aright is to pay a due attention to God, and it is true that we become what we pay attention to, set our minds upon, seek above all else. The worshipper becomes like his god whether his god be the Living God or such gods as money, pleasure, fame, or self upon the altars of which men sacrifice themselves. It is with this becoming like God that our prayer, as indeed all our religion, is to be concerned.

You have only to read your New Testament to see that it is not occupied with what is commonly called 'getting to heaven' or with 'saving one's soul,' but with seeking God and coming into that union with Him which alone fits us for heaven. 'Be perfect,' says Jesus Christ, 'even as your Father Who is in heaven is perfect,' and all through the New Testament it is our becoming perfect which is insisted upon, not just our getting to heaven. For heaven is no place save for the heavenly-minded. It is not merely a place of delightful and unending happiness, of freedom from temptation and sin, sorrow and suffering; it is not these things which make heaven to be what it is. What makes heaven to be heaven is the Presence of God—God seen, known, loved, served, delighted in. Thus the true happiness of heaven for us can lie only in the fulfilment of our desire for union with God; unless we are like God we cannot see God, heaven could not be heaven to us. We could not be happy there any more than a man who does not care for good music could be happy at a symphony

concert. We must be seeking to become the kind of men and women who find their truest happiness in being at one with God. For it is this which perfects our nature and so fits us for the perfection of heaven.

Then we must see that the chief business of Christians is not 'saving their souls,' but the positive doing of the will of God, the learning to praise, reverence, and serve Him, and *by this means* to save their souls, which is not just to rescue their souls from danger, but to have them restored to perfect health. 'By this means,' that is, if we are seeking to praise God, to confess Him as our God, to reverence Him, that is, to treat Him as He deserves to be treated, and to serve Him with all our being, then we shall save our souls. But not by putting our salvation in the first place, for 'he that seeketh to save his life shall lose it.' To seek to save our souls is to become occupied with and intent upon ourselves, whereas what we need is to get out of ourselves, and this we can do only by becoming occupied with and intent upon God, as our Lord teaches us all through the Gospel.

We have used the phrase 'union with God' several times; what do we mean by it? Actually it has three different meanings, although each one has a relation to the others. Man is united to God by the fact that he lives, moves, and has his being in God, that his whole nature and life derives from, and is supported by, God. This is true of all men, even of those who deny God or sin against Him. We call it man's union with God by nature.

Then there is that union which God accomplishes when He unites us to Himself in Baptism, a union which our natural powers are incapable of attaining. This is a supernatural union of man with God by grace.

But there is a third state of union which is much closer and to which union by grace is meant to lead, that is, the union of our minds, wills, and affections with the mind and will and love of God. Such a union is our perfection, for it means that there is nothing in ourselves which is in the least contrary to the mind and will of God. It means that

our thoughts, our desires, our wills are all at one with God's, that we love only what He loves, will only what He wills. It is this union between ourselves and God which prayer is meant to produce.

Thus we must never think of prayer as a means by which we try to get God to do what we want. That is the very opposite of Christian prayer, it is an imitation of heathen prayer and magic by which the suppliant hopes that he may induce the gods to do what he desires. But Christian prayer seeks to know what God's will is and to be conformed to it by the help of His grace. All Christian prayer is rooted in, and directed toward, the fulfilment of the divine will 'on earth as it is in heaven.'

We come, then, to see what constitutes the act of prayer. It is, simply, to choose to be with God by a deliberate act of our will, to place ourselves in His Presence, to attend to, to wait upon Him, to worship, praise, and thank Him, to place our needs and those of others before Him in faith and confidence that He will supply them in the

way He knows to be best for us. And in all this we are to come to God as His children, simply, trustfully, lovingly, desiringly. Not as spoilt, selfish, wilful children, wanting to have our own way or everything we ask for, and sulking if we do not get it. For the very object of our coming is that we may grow out of our selfish, wilful ways and become the good, obedient, loving children of God, and so the good and loving members of His family here upon earth.

We must get this into our minds. One of the greatest faults of Christians, perhaps the greatest, is the failure to see that their belief and practice must have a real influence upon their daily lives, that it must mould their thoughts, their words, their actions, their attitude to their neighbours. All the acts of our religion, and especially our prayer, are meant to effect a change in us, to make us different people, those who are growing *out of* their own narrow, selfish, unloving ways and growing up into the ways of Jesus. This cannot be done in a moment, it is the work of a life-time, and we must never be

discouraged because of our failures or the slowness of our progress. But we must not, on the other hand, settle down to contentment with ourselves as we are, and to allowing the gap between our religious practice and our daily life to remain as it is. There will be a gap between what we profess and are aiming at and our daily life in the world; we shall not always succeed in living as we pray. But we must always be wanting and doing our best to translate our prayer into practice, to let our thinking, speaking, and doing become more and more closely conformed to our prayer.

We are apt to think that our conduct in our daily lives is more important than our prayer, and that idea usually arises from our having misconceptions about prayer. The truth is that prayer is more important than conduct, for conduct is the consequence of our thoughts, and to pray aright is to have our thoughts more and more attuned to and at one with the thought and will of God. Conduct is the test of our prayer, it shows whether we are praying aright, whether we

have the right idea of prayer or not. If our idea of prayer is that it is a way of getting God on our side, of persuading Him to let us have our own way, of cajoling Him into giving us what we think is good for us, then our daily lives will be in accord with our foolish prayer. We shall assume that God is on our side, that we can seek to have our own way and what we imagine is good for us. We shall become more selfish, mean, ungenerous, over-bearing, and uncharitable, whilst all the time we think how very Christian we are and how very wicked every one is who disagrees with us or thwarts us.

To pray is to place oneself in the presence of God with the intention of seeking Him and of becoming more like Him, of giving up our own will and accepting and doing His will. Now, what do we mean by placing ourselves in the presence of God? For we are always in His presence, as the Psalmist says:

O Lord, Thou hast searched me out and known
me,
Thou knowest my down-sitting and mine uprising;

Thou art about my path, and about my bed.
All my ways are known unto Thee.
Whither shall I go then from Thy Spirit :
Or whither shall I go then from Thy presence?
If I climb up into heaven, Thou art there,
If I go down into hell, Thou art there also.
If I take the wings of the morning
And remain in the uttermost parts of the sea ;
Even there also shall Thy hand lead me,
And Thy right hand shall hold me.

That is true, but it is also true that we cannot be *consciously* remembering and thinking of God all the time. For God has given to each one of us many things of one kind and another to do, and each of these things is part of His will for us, to be done with attention 'as to the Lord and not as to men' only.

Whilst, then, we are performing the duties of our vocation our conscious thought and attention must be given to those duties ; and this means that we cannot at the same time be consciously and directly attending to, thinking of, God. But this does not mean that we are forgetting Him or are necessarily

unrecollected in Him, only that we are not *directly and consciously* thinking of Him. When we are doing what God wants of us in the way of our vocation we are actually recollected though not consciously remembering or seeing that we are so. Yet since so much of our time must be spent in this way, there is a constant danger that we may be carried away from God by things and duties, may be overwhelmed by the pressure and multitude of the things of this world and lose our sense of balance and of the true end of our lives. So, too, all this occupation with the things of our daily lives tends to strain and weary our whole being; we are ever using up the grace God gives for our daily tasks, difficulties, and temptations. This is why we need special times of worship and prayer, times when, laying everything else on one side, we consciously and deliberately remember the presence of God, place ourselves in that presence by a willed act of our own, and pay direct attention to God, seek to know His will and the purifying, restoring, strengthening power of His grace.

If we would learn to pray well, three things are necessary. We must fix definite times to be given to prayer. We must not only decide when we will pray, that is, at such a time every morning and evening, but we must fix the length of time we will pray. Unless we do that we shall often be tempted to shorten the time for one reason or another. Besides, we mustn't think that we can wander in and out of the recognized presence of God rather as a careless, sight-seeing tourist wanders in and out of a church. Then, we must stick to our appointed time whether we feel that we are getting good from our prayer or not. For we do not go to our prayer mainly to get something, but to be with God and to be united with Him. And we must remember that we are never the best judges of whether our prayer is good or not. Most of us are nearly always mistaken about this. But why and how we are so mistaken must be explained later on.

Here a word must be added to what has been said about the presence of God. 'God is Spirit,' that is, there is nothing material

or physical about or in Him, He has no body, parts, or passions such as we have. So it follows that His presence is not a presence in a place as we are present in this place and thus cannot be present anywhere else. God is present everywhere, is no more present in one place than in another, although He is more powerfully present in some things and places than in others. For example, He is more powerfully present in an animal than in a stone, in man more than in other animals, in an angel more powerfully than in man. So also there are places, as we see from Holy Scripture, where God is more powerfully present, is more active, you might say, than in others. But this does not mean that He is absent from, or not operating in the degree which is necessary in, any part of His universe. For everywhere He is present as the Creator by Whom all things exist, as the Powerful Wisdom Who sustains all things in their being and life, for ever enveloping, sustaining, containing, and operating in all that is.

This fact of the manner of God's presence

carries with it a truth which much concerns our approach to Him in worship and prayer. Since God is Spirit His presence cannot, normally at least, be apprehended, felt, or experienced by the senses in some such way as we feel the presence of the persons and things of earth. Our senses are given to us to apprehend—see, hear, touch, smell, and taste—material things not spiritual ones, which can be apprehended only by the mind, which is a spiritual faculty, aided by faith.

So we must not expect that we shall have any such sensible feeling or experience of the presence of God in our worship and prayer. I do not say that when we come near to God in prayer we shall never have any such feeling, only that we have no right to expect it and that we must not imagine that its absence means that our prayer is not good. We are so much of a unity, one thing, that a strong spiritual apprehension of God and His more powerful operation in us may flow over, as it were, into the bodily part of our nature. But this is very far from being usual, and we need to be on our guard

against thinking that all stirring up of our feelings in prayer is the act of God or is good for us. It may be very bad. Anyway, no attention should be paid to it, or reliance placed upon it. The real work of God goes on in our innermost spirit, not on the surface of emotions and feelings, and bears fruit, not in 'uplift' and 'experiences' of the senses, exterior or interior, but in the solid doing of the will of God in our daily lives.

III

THE PRAYER OF PETITION

‘Be careful for nothing ; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.’—PHIL. iv. 6.

IT may occur to some readers that the previous chapters have been occupied rather with the principles upon which Christian prayer ought to be based than with the actual practice of prayer. That is so, and of set purpose, for two reasons.

1. Because all right practice depends upon right belief, and upon a right theory of why and how a thing should be done. It is not enough for us to have some kind of belief in God and in the articles of the Christian Faith, we must have a right belief, since our attitude toward God and the truths of the Faith is determined by our belief. It is not sufficient for us to have ideas about prayer, we must

have right and Christian ideas, or our practice of prayer will be, to a greater or less extent, wrong and un-Christian. It is, for example, a wrong conception both of God and of prayer which leads some people to imagine that prayer is a means by which they can persuade God to do or to give what they desire, whereas the truth is that prayer is a means by which we are to see and be conformed to God's will. In prayer, as in everything else, theory and practice must go together, and right practice can result only from right theory. We must learn to pray as our Lord prayed and teaches us to pray, or our prayer will not be Christian prayer.

2. One of the most difficult and yet most necessary things we human beings have to do is to keep a right balance and proportion in all the things which concern our lives. We tend to get things out of their due order, to exaggerate one at the expense of another, to let lesser things take the place of more important ones, to forget that first things should come first. The general disorder from which the whole world suffers to-day

is a consequence of the lack of the sense of the need of order in so many individual lives. The evils of the world are not due to the existence of evil things, they are due to the distortion and misuse of good things, the emphasizing of one good to the exclusion or minimizing of others, the making of a good an end in itself instead of a means toward the one end for which all good exists.

A striking example is to be found in the widely expressed desire for the peace of the world. But it is little use to pray for peace unless you are doing so for the right reason. We should do well to remind ourselves of the fact that we have had twenty years of peace—and what better are we for it? If we would have a true peace we must seek it and pray for it, not because we want to be comfortable, prosperous, undisturbed in our search after temporal things, but that we may practise our religion more earnestly and faithfully and so extend the kingdom of God upon earth. We must see that the peace of which our Lord speaks in the Gospel, and for which the Church prays,

is not an external peace but an interior one, a peace within the soul of man. 'My peace I give unto you, not as the world giveth give I unto you.' There was no more external peace in our Lord's day than there is in ours, nor did He bring about such a peace. There can be no peace in the world until the peace of God reigns in the hearts of men and so influences their relations one with another. The message of the angels was not 'peace on earth, goodwill to men,' it was 'peace on earth to men of goodwill,' the peace which comes as the result of men's seeking to know and to do God's will 'on earth as in heaven.' It is useless to pray for peace alone, we must pray for a peace according to God's will, founded in truth, justice, and charity.

Order, then, is necessary in our prayer, and that order has been laid down by Jesus Christ. 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.' Prayer is the expression of our desire, and the primary desire of the Christian must be that of our Lord, the fulfilling of the divine will. 'I

came to do the will of Him Who sent Me.' 'Not My will but Thine be done.' Thus the right order of prayer is adoration, praise, thanksgiving, confession of our dependence upon God and of our sins against Him, desire not only for His gifts but for Himself, petition and intercession both for our own and others' needs.

How much of our prayer has actually been an inversion of this order? A preoccupation with ourselves instead of an attention to, and seeking after, God, a putting of our needs before everything else, a filling of our whole time of prayer with petition and intercession, and that more concerned with temporal than with spiritual things? Thus our prayer has become more heathen than Christian, more occupied with the temporal than with the eternal, more concerned with self than with God. Can we wonder, then, that our prayer is so fruitless? How should it be otherwise when we spend our time with ourselves instead of with God, only coming to Him as selfish and spoilt children whose one desire is to get what they want and

expend it upon themselves? Of such prayer S. James says, 'Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your pleasures,' that is, upon pleasing yourselves.

Remember, we are thinking of the due order and purpose of prayer, which includes petitions for all our needs. It is perfectly Christian to ask for blessings of the temporal order, since all good comes from God and must be sought of Him. But we are to pray, as our Lord taught us, for 'our daily bread' and for all the necessities of the body in order that we may the better know and love and serve God, not merely that we may go on living as we like. Nor must we fall into the Jewish error, revived by the Puritans, of imagining that temporal prosperity is a sure sign of the favour of God, and the lack of it evidence of His displeasure. Poverty is no more a punishment for sin than are great possessions; in fact, our Lord teaches that riches are more dangerous than poverty. 'How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God.' The wise man

will do well to pray with Agur, 'Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full and deny Thee, and say, Who is the Lord? or lest I be poor and steal, and take the Name of my God in vain.'

The prayer of petition must be kept Christian, and the Apostle is carrying on our Lord's teaching when he writes to the Philippians, 'Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.'

'Be careful for nothing' is an echo of our Lord's 'Take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Where-withal shall we be clothed?' by which He means that we are not to be solicitous and over-anxious about such things so that we live in a state of worry and foreboding as those who do not believe in and trust God as Him Who cares for the whole of His creation. So our requests are to be made known to Him without anxiety or doubt, as to one who can and will supply our needs

in the measure and manner He alone knows to be best for us. We are to have an immense confidence in God, such a faith and trust as Job expressed in the midst of his troubles: 'Though He slay me, yet will I put my trust in Him.'

That faith and confidence in God is often sorely tried in order that it may be strengthened and perfected, as our Lord tested the faith of the Syrophenician woman, and as S. Peter says, 'Though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold trials, that your faith, being much more precious than gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.' It is easy enough for us to think that we have a complete trust in God when everything is going well with us. But it is precisely when things appear to go all wrong that the real opportunity for exercising our faith and trust is offered to us.

In the prayer of petition and intercession, then, we are to come to God with an immense confidence, and to place our needs before

Him with a sure faith that He will do what He knows to be best for us. For we are poor judges of what is most good for us, knowing not, as S. Paul says, 'what we should pray for as we ought,' so that we need to ask that we may be guided to pray aright by the Spirit of God. We must ask ourselves whether what we wish to pray for is according to the will of God, and when we cannot be sure about this, to leave the answer entirely to God. For—

We, ignorant of ourselves,
Beg often our own harms, which the wise powers
Deny us for our good: so find we profit
By losing of our prayers.

Antony and Cleopatra, Act II.

That wise guide in the things of Christian practice, Père Grou, has written words which we shall do well to ponder over. 'As to what we must ask of God it is quite certain that we are not fit judges of what is best for us, or what would harm us, and we cannot do better than leave it entirely to God. One thing that we must ask for is that we may know God and know ourselves; what He is

and what we are; what He has done for us and what we have done against Him; what He deserves and what He has a right to require of us; the value of His grace and the importance of our making a good use of it.' How much of our prayer of petition has been made up of such requests?

Holy Scripture, especially the Gospels, has much to teach us, not only about what we should ask of God, but also about how we should ask. Four examples from the Gospels will illustrate the manner in which the prayer of petition and intercession should be made.

1. The prayer of the Mother of Jesus at Cana, 'They have no wine,' of which Bishop Westcott, in his Commentary on S. John's Gospel, says, 'It is enough to state a want. To describe the circumstances is, in such a case, to express a silent prayer.' It is, in fact, the best way of making a petition to God. To place our need before Him and to leave the answer to Him in such a faith as Mary exhibits as she turns to the servants and bids them, 'Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it.' What better thing could we do, what-

ever the need may be, than so to present it, not as a direct request, 'Please give them wine,' but simply, 'See, they have no wine,' at once placing ourselves in an attitude of obedience to whatever is willed by God? For prayer will be of little use unless obedience goes with it.

2. On one of the busy days of our Lord's life, certain men brought a paralysed friend to be healed of Him. Finding so great a crowd about the door of the house where our Lord was, they went up to the flat roof, made a hole in it, and let their friend down at the feet of Jesus, Who restored him to health because of the faith of those who had brought him. Here, again, we have an example of a need brought to our Lord and left there in faith that whatever He does will be best.

3. Later in the Public Ministry we are told how, when Lazarus was taken ill, his sisters send to our Lord, saying, 'He whom Thou lovest is sick.' Not, 'He is very ill, please come quickly and heal him,' as we should probably have said, but simply, 'He whom Thou lovest is sick,' an expression of

a fact, not the making of a request, and as powerful to move the heart of our Lord as was His Mother's 'They have no wine.' And it is to be remembered that our Lord's response to the need thus set before Him was one which those who sent to Him had never expected. They waited, but our Lord did not come. Lazarus died, and when Jesus comes, Martha meets Him with a great confession of faith, 'Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. But I know, that even now, whatsoever Thou wilt ask of God, God will give it Thee.'

4. But perhaps the most significant example of all is to be seen in Mary standing by the Cross upon which her dear Son was offering His great sacrifice, in which was gathered up the whole of earth's worship, thanksgiving, petition, and intercession. For we must not think of her as a passive figure there any more than she was when the angel came to her at Nazareth, and she bowed her whole being to the divine will, making herself all one with it. At the Cross there was much which she could not do; but one thing,

and that the greatest of all, she did, she united herself with that act which her Son was doing, became more than ever one with His mind and will, desire and prayer. So, as she stands by the Cross she is the perfect example and model of the prayer of petition, the essence of which is to be united to our Lord and His will. Not any prayer of petition, but prayer in the Name, the Person, of Jesus, is heard and answered. 'The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much,' says S. James; the prayer of him who is in a right relation to Jesus, in and by Whom all prayer is to be made.

Yet we must not interpret this truth, as did the Jews of our Lord's day, to mean that 'God heareth not sinners,' for there is no prayer which He delights more to hear, as our Lord taught in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. The distinction between men which our Lord makes is not that some are righteous and some are sinners, but that some are sinners who know and confess their sinful state, whilst others are sinners who neither know nor confess it. The

prayer of a Christian, however advanced in holiness he may be, is always the prayer of a sinner, but a sinner desiring to become all that God desires him to be. We are often inclined to think that the more progress we make in the Christian life, the better we shall feel. But we must not confuse *feeling* better with *being* better. The fact is that the better we actually are, the more we shall be dissatisfied with ourselves, and perceive our sinfulness, though without any discouragement, even though we do not fall into so many acts of sin as we did. This is true humility, which is to see and acknowledge the truth about ourselves, and to see that all our good comes from God and naught but evil of ourselves by ourselves.

The best way, then, to practise the prayer of petition and intercession is to make our requests known to God by bringing our own and others' needs and laying them before Him in an immense, unshakable faith and confidence, and then to spend our time in attending to Him and uniting ourselves with Him. To spend our prayer-time in thinking

about ourselves and our needs, in trying to worry out our problems and difficulties, is to waste and spoil our prayer-time. In prayer we are to follow S. Peter's advice to cast all our care upon God, 'for He careth for you.'

We have thought already of what kind of prayer God has promised to answer. Now let us think of how God answers our prayer.

There is a very common belief that the answer to prayer comes at the time of prayer. The Buchmanites, commonly known as the 'Oxford Group,' make much of the fact that we ought to seek the guidance of God in all the affairs of our daily lives. That is true. But when they go on to treat the time of prayer as a conversation on the telephone and say that the necessary guidance comes while one is praying, they are saying what is contrary to all normal Christian experience. I say 'normal' Christian experience because there have been, and always may be, exceptions to the ordinary way in which God answers our prayer for His guidance. Such teaching as is here mentioned is most dangerous, first, because nothing is easier

than to imagine that God is speaking to us at the time of prayer when in fact we are talking to ourselves. And, secondly, because when no answer appears to come we may conclude that prayer is useless, and so give it up.

The truth is that normally neither the answer to prayer nor its fruit is given whilst we are praying. It is given outside our prayer at the time and in the manner in which it is most needed. Moreover, the answer is given through those natural faculties of mind, reason, judgement, discretion, and common sense with which God has equipped our nature. We pray that God will enlighten and help us about a particular difficulty or problem which confronts us, and God answers us by giving light to our minds and help to our wills so that we may see and do what He knows to be best in any given circumstances. In other words, He does not do something for us which we could and must do for ourselves; He only enables us to use our natural faculties in the way for which they were given to us. God's enlightening and giving grace to our souls, of which our

minds and wills are the highest faculties, is not meant to supersede the use of those faculties, but to make us capable of using them to the fullest extent.

The answer to our prayer, then, does not come usually whilst we are praying; and further, it may often be delayed for one reason or another. For example, we may ask for some gift of God without earnestly and sincerely desiring it. When S. Augustine was a young man he used to pray, 'O Lord, give me continence, but not yet.' Though we may not be as honest as that, we perhaps ask God for something which we do not really want at the time. Or we may not want it sufficiently, so that if it were given to us we should only waste it. We all know that to give things to people who do not want them, or cannot appreciate and use them aright, may do them more harm than good. So God delays His answer to our prayer in order that our desire for what we ask may become so real and strong that we shall use it rightly when He does bestow it upon us.

Then, God does not always answer our

prayer in the way which we expected and hoped for when we made it. We are rather given, not only to asking God for what we need, but at least in thought to laying down the particular way in which His answer is to come to us. This exposes us to the danger of thinking, when God does not answer our prayer in the way we expected, that He has not answered it at all. There is a very well-known man who when he was at school prayed that he might gain a scholarship to a certain college. When he did not succeed, he came to the conclusion that prayer was useless and that the Christian religion was not true. Yet only a short time afterwards he did gain a scholarship to a much better college, and admits that this has had the greatest influence on his whole life. But he still sticks to his delusion that God did not answer his prayer.

It is no less important to remember that 'No' is just as much an answer as 'Yes,' and sometimes a better one. A child who had been praying for a particular thing was asked by her father, 'Well, my dear, has God

answered your prayer?" 'Oh, yes,' she replied, 'He said "No."' Many of our prayers are not only childish but foolish, and when God says 'No,' He is treating us as a wise and loving parent who, for example, does not give a razor or a carving knife to the baby who cries for it. Or, He may say, as we sometimes do when we deny a child what it asks for, 'No, you are not old enough for that yet, wait a little and you shall have it.'

All the prayer of a Christian implies, and is bound up in, a great faith and confidence in God, as our Lord tells us in the Gospels, and as S. James writes, 'Let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven by the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord.' In prayer we come to our all-knowing and all-loving Father Who not only wills all good to us, but also knows what is good for us, and Whose government of our lives is so exercised that, as S. Paul says, 'All things work together for good to them that love God.' True we

cannot always see this, nor must we expect to do so. Here 'we walk by faith, not by sight,' and our prayer of loving confidence, waiting quietly and trustfully upon God, is an exercise of that faith by which we are to come to the vision of God 'Whom having not seen ye love ; in whom, though now ye see Him not, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory ; receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls.'

IV

MENTAL PRAYER

‘Think of the Lord in goodness, and seek Him in simplicity of heart.’—WISD. i. 1.

‘Set your minds on things above, not on things on the earth.’—COL. iii. 2.

TWO things are to be kept in mind regarding the prayer of petition and intercession. First, that the best way to practise it is to bring our needs simply to God, laying them before Him and then spending our prayer-time in paying attention to Him and uniting ourselves with Him. For we are ‘not heard for our much speaking,’ but in so far as our minds and wills are one with the mind and will of God. To spend our time of prayer in preoccupation with ourselves, in thinking and worrying about our needs, is to waste our time and to lose the peace and strength which should be part of

the fruit of prayer. S. Peter bids us cast all our care upon God 'for He careth for' us, and unless prayer is made in faith and confidence in the promises, the power, and the mercy of God, it is hardly worthy of being called prayer at all.

Secondly, let us ask ourselves, Why am I praying for this or that? For the reason why we are making any particular petition is more important than the petition itself. Why, for example, are we praying for the peace of the world? That we may be left in comfort, increase our worldly possessions, be saved from bodily harm, enjoy our pleasures, and so on? Or, as the Church prays, that 'the course of this world may be so peaceably ordered by Thy governance, that Thy Church may joyfully serve Thee in all godly quietness'? So especially with all the temporal blessings we ask of God, we must see that we are praying for them in order that we may use them aright, that is, that they may aid us to know, love, and serve God better.

We have seen that the main object of prayer is not just to get something, but to

become something; to become all that God desires of us, to 'grow up' into Christ as the Apostle says, to advance toward perfection as our Lord has bidden us: 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father Who is in heaven is perfect.' The whole of the New Testament insists that although, as our Lord says, we must become as little children in order that we may enter into the kingdom of heaven, we are not to be content to remain children, like Peter Pan who did not want to grow up. We are to 'grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ,' to grow out of our childish ways of thinking and acting, and to grow up 'unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,' by putting off 'our old manner of life and renewing the 'spirit of our mind,' by putting on the mind of Christ.

Now although our souls and bodies are two very different things, yet the laws by which they grow are very much the same. In order that our bodies may grow up strong and healthy we need food, air, and exercise; we need, too, to take care of our minds since

what we think has a tremendous influence upon our bodies. Further, we need not only the right kind of food but even more the capacity to digest and assimilate it. But we are not bodies only, like the rest of the animal world; we are souls, and our Lord has said, 'Man doth not live by bread alone, but by every word which proceedeth from the mouth of God.' He has taught us, too, to pray, 'Give us this day our daily bread,' and that means the food for our whole being, soul as well as body; for to seek only bodily food is to behave as mere animals instead of as the rational, spiritual beings which God has made us to be.

The food of our soul is that 'Living Bread which came down from heaven' and includes all that 'grace and truth which came by Jesus Christ.' Truth for our minds and grace for our wills. The truth about God, what He is and what He wills and has done for us; the truth about ourselves, what and why we are; the truth about all the things and conditions of our human lives; the truth by which we are to see our way through the

darkness of this life. The Psalmist prayed, and we shall do well to pray, 'O send out Thy light and Thy truth that they may lead me'; and that prayer was answered when the True Light was born, He Who said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life.'

We are to receive, to feed upon, this divine food of truth and grace in order that we may live with an eternal, undying life; for this is *the* gift which our Lord came upon earth to bestow upon us. 'The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.' But this divine food needs not only to be received; like the food of our body, it must be digested, assimilated, taken and woven into the substance of our being so that we live on and by it. And one of the principal ways in which this is done is by the practice of what is called mental prayer or meditation. Why is this? Because our souls are the principal and active source of our whole nature and life. The body has no life of its own, it is the soul which makes the body a living thing, so that when the soul leaves the body it is no longer a body but only a collec-

tion of material particles rapidly falling apart, dust returning to dust. A dead body is not a man, for it has lost that which makes a man what he is, a rational, thinking, willing, loving animal. Those three great activities of thought, will, and affection are activities of our souls which need both food and exercise. The food is given to us by God in the form of truth and grace, but the exercise by which that food becomes our own, vitalizing and strengthening our whole nature, must be done by us. That exercise is mental prayer, in which we use our minds to 'think of the Lord in goodness,' our hearts to 'seek Him in simplicity,' and our wills to choose His ways in preference to our own.

Have you ever thought about the difference between information and knowledge? We often use these words as if they meant the same thing, but in reality they do not. Information is news conveyed to us by another, something we are told or that we read in a paper or book. But knowledge can be gained only by our thinking about the information we have received, and so

making it our own. As the philosophers say, 'The thing which is known is in the knower.' We do not gain knowledge merely by listening or reading, but only by thinking about what we hear and read so that it becomes part of our life.

So, too, there is a world of difference between knowing about a person or a country and knowing them for oneself. We know something about various great men whose names are in the news, but we do not know them as we know our relatives and friends. In other words, we have information *about* them, not knowledge *of* them. Now the Church gives us information about God and the things of the spiritual order by means of teachers, parents, Holy Scripture, and books; but this is information which we have to translate into knowledge of God, a personal knowledge of friendship and love. And unless we do this we shall not grow up in our Christian lives, we shall remain mere children, weak and useless Christians, like those who are content to acquiesce merely in the truths of religion, and who imagine that

truth and grace will act as charms or magic are supposed to act, without their doing anything actively to correspond with and make their own the truth and grace given to them. This is a delusion, for, like food, neither truth nor grace is of any use to us unless we digest and assimilate it so that it becomes the source and power of our daily lives.

Let us see, then, how we are to exercise ourselves in the practice of mental prayer.

1. First of all we need a particular subject upon which to meditate, that is, think about, and this we shall best find in the New Testament. For one of the chief objects of meditation is that we may 'put on the mind of Christ,' and that mind is shown to us in the acts and words of our Lord and in what the Apostles tell us about Him. We cannot think about all this at once, we need to take it bit by bit, so that gradually we may see and enter into the meaning of it all. So we may let one of the Evangelists choose our subjects, by going through one of the Gospels, taking one incident, miracle, parable, or a few words of our Lord at a time. Or we

may make a list of subjects—for example, humility, obedience, charity, patience, and so on—as exhibited in our Lord's life. Or we can take what He says about Himself, or what is said about Him in the Epistles. The whole point is to have something definite to occupy our thought and attention, and at the beginning it is best that this should be something concrete which we can picture in our imagination. The great mysteries of the Gospel, the Annunciation, the Birth of our Lord, the acts of His earthly life, the Passion and Resurrection, the Great Forty Days, the Ascension, and the Descent of the Holy Ghost are such subjects. There are, of course, many books which do the choosing for us and may help us; but we ought not to get into the habit of depending too much upon them.

2. Having chosen a subject, which must be done before we come to our prayer-time, we place ourselves in the presence of God, asking for His light and grace, and then take up the object, look at it and think about it.

That 'looking at' our subject is very im-

portant, for this is what sets our thinking to work. It is something like what we do when we notice a little crowd gathering to look at something which is going on. We say to ourselves, 'I wonder what they are looking at?' and cross the street to see for ourselves. And if it is something interesting we stand and watch and are moved to certain thoughts and sentiments and, perhaps, to expressions of our thoughts in word or action.

Suppose you see such a crowd and you ask, 'What is the matter?' and are told, 'The King is coming.' 'Oh,' you say, 'I must wait and see him.' So you wait and watch and when he comes you are filled with emotions of loyalty and homage. You cry, 'God save the King!' or 'Hurrah!' and feel how good it is to have a good sovereign, how much he deserves that obedience and service which we ordinarily pay in a very humble way but which we might be called upon to pay with suffering, wounds, and death. Now all this is a meditation upon sovereignty and its claims upon us and might easily be changed into a meditation upon the Kingship of our

Lord and all that it ought to mean to every Christian. But all that I want you to see at the moment is that this looking at our Lord in some mystery of His life is the way to begin our mental prayer, so that the looking awakens our thinking and our desires. For this is the purpose of the meditative part of our prayer. It has been said that in mental prayer 'we reflect in order that we may think aright, we think aright in order that we may desire aright, we desire aright in order that we may pray aright, we pray aright in order to gain the grace of loving, willing, and doing what is right.'

3. So from our looking at, and thinking about, some act or words of our Lord, certain emotions and desires are aroused within us. How good, how loving, how patient, how merciful is He, how worthy of our worship, our praise, our thanks, our love and service. How truly penitent we ought to be for everything by which we have denied Him that love and service. How much we need to beg His grace that we may love and serve Him as He deserves to be loved and served.

You see how all this comes out of our looking and thinking. Such appreciation, desire, and prayer will not always be centred on the same things. It will depend both on the particular subject of our meditation and upon our actual state at the time. When our Lady thought upon the goodness of God she sang her *Magnificat* ; when S. Peter thought of it he cried, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.' So will it be with us ; sometimes we shall only be able to worship, praise, and thank God, at other times we shall only be able to say, 'God be merciful to me a sinner.' But if we do really look at our Lord and think of Him, we shall always have something to say to Him and to ask of Him.

4. But emotions and words are not enough. They easily evaporate and are forgotten unless we translate them into act. Our mental prayer is intended to produce the fruit of good works in our daily lives, to aid us to be more actively Christian. So at the end of our thinking and praying we are to make some definite resolution which can be put

into practice at once. Sometimes such a resolution will come quite naturally out of our prayer. We shall see that there is something that we ought to do or not to do, our Lord will have taught us some lesson which we need to put into practice. Then the making of a resolution is easy. But this is not always the case. There are times when no very definite thing seems to suggest itself to us, and when this is so, we should make a general resolution to avoid all sin and to serve God earnestly for this one day. For a resolution to do something *to-day* is much more likely to be kept than one made for a greater length of time; and what a good thing it would be if we kept such a resolution just for to-day.

We are apt to forget that every act of faith, obedience, and love, every resistance to temptation, every effort we make, even if we fail in carrying it through to success, is a step in the right direction, an act by which we become stronger in our Christian lives. We must not allow ourselves to dwell chiefly on our sins and failures and broken resolutions;

that only weakens and depresses us. When we fail we must simply make an act of contrition—‘My Jesus, I am sorry’—and go on again a little more carefully, knowing our weakness but also confiding more in the grace of God.

Many people imagine that they have no capacity or no time to practise mental prayer. As to capacity, this does vary with each individual, but to say, ‘I can’t meditate,’ is to say, ‘I can’t think,’ and that is not true. We can all think about what we want to think about; and what ought we to want to think about more than the things of God which are our eternal life? Meditation does not mean to think *great* thoughts about God or the mysteries of the Gospel, but only to pay a loving attention to Him and to look at His mysteries simply and desiringly. Any one can do it who wants to.

Then, as to time. Many people have very little, next to no time, as we say. But any one could take some one act or word of our Lord each day, and every now and then set his mind upon it for a moment, so that each day

would be spent in the atmosphere and spirit of holy things, not all occupied and absorbed in worldly affairs. And this would be a great help to us, not only in keeping ourselves 'unspotted from the world,' but also in making all our life a prayer. For what is it to 'pray always,' as our Lord bids us, but always to desire that we may do God's will in all things?

To sum up, we are meant to grow up in our Christian lives, and this depends upon our putting on the mind, the will, the desires, and dispositions of our Lord. Mental prayer is a great help to this since we become what we habitually think about, set our minds upon, pay attention to. 'As a man thinketh, so is he,' for all our activity in word or deed flows from our minds. We too often take the world's view of sin as consisting in some wrong word or act. But sin is a spiritual thing, it begins in the mind, in what we think, as our Lord teaches us in the Sermon on the Mount. Thus it is our thoughts which require most attention. 'Guard well thy thoughts, for thoughts are heard in

heaven.' And the best way to do this is by filling our minds with right and good thoughts. Much of our failure to do what is right is due to the fact that we only try to suppress or drive out our wrong thoughts and imaginations, and the more we try the less we succeed. Of course, because all the time we are thinking about ourselves and our wrong thoughts, which only encourages them. What we need is a defence against evil and selfish thoughts *inside* our minds so that there is no room for the former to get in and stay there. So the Psalmist says, 'I have set God alway before mine eyes, therefore I shall not fall,' and the Apostle bids us 'set our minds on things above,' to 'look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen,' the things of the eternal, spiritual order; and again he writes, 'Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.'

We have seen how mental prayer is such a 'thinking of the Lord in goodness and a seeking of Him in simplicity of heart.' It is even more. S. Paul himself teaches us that what we look at and think about, that we become. 'We all, with open face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory unto glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord.'

That mirror in which we are to behold the glory of the Lord is the Person, the Life, the Acts, and Words of our Lord, the 'image of the invisible God,' gazing upon which in our mental prayer we are 'changed into the same image,' that is, into the likeness of Jesus as we grow up into Him in all things. Let us not be discouraged because that growth is slow and very much hidden from ourselves. All we need to do is to pay attention to the things by which we grow, to persevere in our prayer, and the other practices of our Christian life, and we shall grow. It is desire, fidelity, and perseverance which matter, not our seeing or feeling our progress,

which is impossible. For 'we walk by faith, not by sight' or feeling, and our Lord has promised, 'He that shall endure unto the end shall be saved.'

V

WHAT MAKES A GOOD PRAYER?

'Pray without ceasing.'—I THESS. v. 17.

PRAYER is the most necessary practice of the Christian life, the way to an ever-growing union with God which is open to us at all times and in every circumstance. This necessity of prayer comes from three chief reasons.

1. That by prayer we acknowledge our belief in God, our hope and confidence in Him. We take our rightful place before Him, confessing our utter dependence upon Him from Whom all our good, whether of soul or body, comes, without Whom we can do nothing towards attaining the end and purpose for which we were created. We come to God as creatures to our Creator, servants to our Lord, children to our most loving Father, those who have been made

the sons of God by union with His Beloved Son that we may enter into a loving and intimate friendship with Him. We show that we know our place, our standing, our true relationship to God, and this is that humility which is the foundation of a truly Christian life.

2. Prayer, too, is the condition which God has laid down as the means by which we are able to receive and make good use of His gifts. For the gifts which He has intended to give us from all eternity, He wills to give us as we see our need of them and desire them. This is because no gift is of use to us unless we want it and so shall make a right use of it, and prayer is the expression of our desire which, if it is according to the desire of Jesus in Whose Name we pray, will be granted us.

3. As we saw in the last chapter, prayer, especially mental prayer, is, as an ancient writer says, 'the assimilative force of the soul,' it fulfils a purpose for the soul similar to that which digestion does for the body. Truth and grace are the soul's food, and

prayer aids us to assimilate that food, to make it our own, and thus tends toward our growth in the Christian life.

To neglect our daily morning and evening prayer is, then, one of the gravest sins we can commit. It is to ignore our dependence upon God, to fall into that primal sin of thinking ourselves independent, sufficient of ourselves, the sin by which Lucifer, star of the morning, fell from heaven, and our first parents brought ruin upon our race. We should perceive the gravity of the sin of neglecting our daily prayers if we did not so readily accept the world's estimate of what constitutes the worst sins which men can commit, instead of that which the Church and Holy Scripture teach us. The popular Press with its daily record of gross bodily sins would give the impression that these are the worst sins of which man is capable. But, as in most things, the popular Press is wrong, for sin lies in the mind, its roots are in our spiritual nature, and the worst sins are those of the spirit, not simply of the body. The root of all sin is pride, vanity, self-esteem,

selfishness, the claim to be independent of God, to go one's own way, to do what one likes, to be one's own master. It is to forget or to deny both the incapacity of our nature and the fact of our sinfulness, to make all reform of self impossible. For even God can do nothing for the man who thinks that he needs to have nothing done for him.

If it may be said that one time of prayer is more important than another, then it is true that our morning prayer is more important than that made in the evening. For each day given to us by the love and patience of God is another opportunity to know, love, and serve Him and so to grow up in our Christian life. But a day which is begun without the recollection of God, which lacks the formal recognition of our faith in Him, and our need of His aid, will be a day more or less wasted, an opportunity the meaning and value of which passes unnoticed and uncared for. To neglect our morning prayer is to be like a soldier going into battle unaware and unarmed, or to be like a traveller wandering about without direction or purpose. Nothing

so contributes to a good, well-spent day than to begin it quietly in the presence of God, putting aside all else until we have made our prayer, and so going forth to our day, with all that it may bring to us, Christianly, calmly, confidently in the faith and grace of God.

In an earlier chapter I said that we are not usually the best judges of whether our prayer has been good or not. We are very apt to estimate its goodness by such tests as whether it has been fairly easy to pray or not, whether we have had pious feelings and emotions or not, whether we have been much or little distracted in our prayer. But such ways of judging our prayer are generally wrong and useless.

A good prayer is one which has been made with a good will, with the intention to seek God and to please Him in all things, a prayer made whether we had pious emotions or not, whether we were full of sensible devotion or, on the other hand, cold and dry and distracted. For the good of prayer, so far as we are concerned, lies in our will and inten-

tion, not in our feelings or our apparent success. There has never been any more perfect prayer than that of our dear Lord beneath the olive-trees in Gethsemane, when all His human soul and body revolted in anguish against the drinking of the cup of the Passion which He brought all the power of His will to accept. Here were no nice feelings, no sensible devotion, no pleasing of Himself, no consolation save that of doing His Father's will to the uttermost. Here we are shown that the very essence of prayer is not the finding of pleasure and comfort for ourselves, but the willingness to accept that which is pleasing to God and the gaining of the strength we need so to accept and do His will.

Thus we are not to be of those who, as a great saint says, 'complain that they have no taste for prayer, no pleasure in meditation, and so are downcast, and when they feel it difficult or hindrances come between them and their good intentions, become troubled and easily throw them aside. And why? Because they want consolation, ease,

and comfort, they would like to pray in the scent of orange water and exercise holiness by eating sugar, considering not how our dear Lord fell on His face in agony, sweating great drops of blood through the intense conflict between His human nature and His resolution to fulfil His Father's will.' And the common-sense and plain-speaking S. Teresa, writing of the same thing, says, 'How ridiculous it is! Here we are, with a thousand obstacles, drawbacks, and imperfections in ourselves, yet we are not ashamed to expect sweetness in prayer or of complaining when we feel dry and cold.'

Sensible devotion is not what we come to prayer for, but true, interior devotion which is the 'fair flower of charity,' the fruit of love for God shown in the desire and endeavour to please Him, and not ourselves, in all things. A devoted nurse, a devoted husband or wife, called to some trying and unpleasant task, does not say, 'I don't feel like it.' They put their feelings and pleasure on one side, and this is what a devoted Christian does in the matter of prayer, as

in all his or her life; for of our Master it is said, 'Christ pleased not Himself.'

So we must not wait for, or try to excite, pious emotions before we come to our prayer, putting it off until, as we say, we 'feel like it.' For, indeed, the more we do this, the less we shall feel like it. Nor must we look for and expect such emotions in our prayer, for we cannot command them, nor are they of any use to us unless they come from God, Who does not always give them. To seek for 'experiences' in our prayer is to lay ourselves open to delusions which may proceed from ourselves or from the devil, nor is it always possible for us to know whence they come. We are to seek God and His grace, to wait upon Him, to attend to Him, to open ourselves before Him, and the greater the grace He gives, the less it will be perceptible to our senses. For these were given to us to perceive the things of this world; God and the things of the spiritual world are perceived and received only by faith, not by sight or feeling.

That we ought to be recollected, reverent,

attentive in our prayer is obvious, but far from easy, as we know from the way in which our imagination wanders so that we are tempted at times to think that such distractions make our prayer useless. But whilst we must do what we can to remember to Whom we are praying and to attend to what we are saying, our prayer-time is not the time to set about trying to be recollected and undistracted. That must be done outside our prayer-time by our being more careful habitually to control our thoughts. We are the same persons in prayer as in the rest of our lives, and if we allow our imagination to run riot during the day, we cannot expect to be able to 'switch off' suddenly at the time of prayer and become recollected persons whose thoughts are kept in order. Even if we do our best to discipline our thoughts we cannot be entirely undistracted at our prayer, except by the special intervention of God taking us out of ourselves, as it were. So teach all the great masters of prayer, who also tell us what we are to do about our distractions. We are not to fuss and worry

about them, allowing them to discourage us and even to cause us to give up our prayer, but directly we perceive them, we are to bring ourselves back to our prayer and go on quietly. Then, even if the whole time our prayer seems to be spent in doing little more than this, we have not wasted it. Indeed, we may have improved it since we have spent it in choosing God in preference to the things to which our wayward imagination drew our attention.

A great deal of discouragement in our Christian practice comes from our pride and vanity. We desire to be successful, and our failures cause us chagrin and shame, our feelings are hurt, we are annoyed with ourselves, and often imagine that this is penitence. But penitence is a fruit of that true humility which recognizes that we are but as children at school in the things of Christian practice, who cannot expect to learn the lessons of eternity without much failure, and that this must not discourage us but only be a spur to greater effort. Our Lord does not bid us to be successful but only to per-

severe, which means to go on with a great desire in spite of all our failures. 'He that shall endure to the end shall be saved.' S. Paul does not pride himself on having attained his goal, but confesses that 'I count not myself to have apprehended; but this one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.' It is that pressing on, rising again and again from our failures with a dogged determination not to be beaten and with a more fervent prayer for God's grace, which is the secret of our progress.

Two more points are of great importance. In all our approach to God we must come as we are. There are times when we feel drawn to prayer, times when we don't feel like praying; times when our minds are quiet and recollected, times when they are full of cares and anxieties; times when we are physically fit and times when we are tired or ill; times when we have kept temptation at bay and times when we have fallen before its on-

slaught. But whatever our state may be we must not try to hide it or pretend that we are something which we are not. What God wants is ourselves as we are, nor can He do anything for us save as we come frankly and sincerely as we are.

Just as I am, without one plea
But that Thy Blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee—

so ought we to come to our prayer. And when we come let us remember the words of a great spiritual teacher, 'Pray as well as you can, and don't try to pray as you can't.'

The second thing to be remembered is that prayer is not all our doing, simply an act of our own. S. Paul says, 'The Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit Himself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.' 'And what,' says S. Augustine, 'is "maketh intercession for us" but "maketh us to intercede"?' He breathes into our hearts the desire and the knowledge how to pray as we ought, as our Lord has said, 'It is not you

that speak but the Spirit of your Father Who speaketh in you.' Read that eighth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans and you will see how all that we have said about the nature of Christian prayer finds its justification in verses 1-17.

I have heard people say, 'I want to pray, I do try and pray, but I simply cannot.' This is an error, for to want to pray and to try to do so is to pray, however difficult it may be to find any words to express ourselves, or however distracted, dry, and poor our effort seems. To come to God with a good will and desire is to come within the immediate sphere of the powerful operation of Him Who hears the desire of everything living and aids every effort we make to come to Him.

We pass to a brief consideration of the relation of prayer to our daily lives. Prayer cannot be separated from conduct, but what is the right relation between them? The Archbishop of York has answered this question by saying, 'The true relation between prayer and conduct is not that conduct is

more important and that prayer helps it, but that prayer is more important and that conduct tests it.' Why is this so? Because conduct flows from, and is the consequence of, what most often occupies our minds; a man is and acts as he thinks; his views, his ideals, his standards and principles determine what he becomes and what he does. Now we have seen that the main object of prayer is the conforming of our minds and wills to the mind and will of our Lord. The effect, then, of prayer will first manifest itself in our minds in a change of our ways of thinking about things, in an abandonment of thoughts and principles which are contrary to the mind and will of God. This change of mind will influence our conduct; the more Christian our thoughts become, the more Christian will our outlook and conduct be. But, it will be said, how little this is actually the case with ourselves, what a great gap there is between our prayer and our conduct. That is so, and to some extent will always be so; the best we can do in this life is to make the gap narrower. We have constantly to

confess that 'we do not live up to what we profess,' as the saying is. No, and we never shall. If we had asked one of the saints whether he did so, we know what the answer would have been. The only persons who have made such a claim were the Pharisee of whom our Lord spoke and those who, like him, are blinded with spiritual pride. The fact is that absolute perfection lies beyond our reach, but by desiring it and stretching out toward it we become capable of it after this present life.

But we must not let our prayer run too far ahead of our practice so that conduct becomes separated from prayer and is no longer governed by it. For the good of our prayer is not to be looked for in our prayer-time but in our work-time, in our conduct as we go about amongst our fellows. This is the true test of our prayer, not pious feelings whilst we are at prayer. And this is what the Apostle means when he says that we are to 'pray without ceasing.' Not, of course, that we must be always saying our prayers, since God has given us many other things to

do; but that, just as when we pray we desire that His will may be done in and by us, so in the rest of our life we are desiring and endeavouring to do God's will in all things. To 'pray without ceasing' is never to give up our desire and our endeavour, to let our prayer flow into every activity of our daily lives, so that, as S. Paul says, 'whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as unto the Lord . . . for ye serve the Lord Christ.' It is to try to be as Christian in our homes and in our work, in our relations with others, in every word and deed, as we are in our prayer.

'But that is just where I am always failing.' Yes, but remember that you are only a child in the school of Jesus Christ, and that He does not ask of us success but only a continual desire and perseverance. There is no need for, and no sense in, our giving way to disappointment and discouragement because of our failures. We must be penitent for them, and an essential of true penitence is confidence in God and a renewal of our resolution and our endeavour to serve Him more faithfully. We do no good, but much

harm, by sitting down and bemoaning our falls; the Christian thing is to get up and 'run in the way of God's commandments,' at least trying in our conduct to catch up with our prayer. So shall we make progress, however little we may see it ourselves. That is not necessary or even possible. But as our body grows by our paying attention to the things which it needs, so our spiritual life will grow if we pay attention to what it needs, and 'continuing instant in prayer' seek God Who is our Life, and living in union with our Lord 'grow up unto Him in all things,' that so all our life may become a prayer and 'a praise of His glory' as we are 'changed from glory unto glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord.'

VI

PROGRESS IN PRAYER

'Let us go on unto perfection.'—HEB. vi. 1.

WE speak of 'the life of prayer,' of 'the spiritual life,' 'the life of service,' and so on; but such distinctions must not lead us away from the fact that we have but one life, a life which is essentially spiritual, that is, immaterial in its nature, so that whatever activities we perform, whether we pray or play, fast or eat a good dinner, serve God, the devil, or self, we can do so only as the spiritual beings which we are. The highest virtues and the grossest sins are both possible to us because we are not mere animals but spiritual, thinking, willing, and loving persons who are so much more than animals or things.

Prayer, then, is a particular activity of the one being which I am. It is myself directly and consciously turned away from myself to

God, not merely a part but the whole of myself. It is my life in a prayerful attitude and exercise, and so, as the act of a living, growing, and changing person, prayer must be a growing, developing, and changing thing. Prayer can no more remain the same as it was in the past than I can remain the same. My prayer to-day is what I am and desire to-day, or it is not my prayer.

Now since human life grows and changes from childhood to old age, on normal lines we should expect to find that prayer does also; and this is confirmed by the fact that it is the activity of a living being, that it tends toward a definite end, and also by the experience of those who have made the most progress in the life of prayer. Of the first two points something has been said already, of the third it must be understood that if we are really to know what anything is, we must see it in its perfection, as a completed thing. Prayer is so seen in the great contemplatives of the Church, since they have gone further in the way of prayer than others and thus can tell us more about the growing and changing

nature of the life of prayer. They speak from experience, and although their experience cannot be given to us, it does afford us guidance and help, is like a guide-book and maps of an unknown country. We may not get as far as they did, and that is not always our own fault, but with the knowledge they can give us we shall get further than we otherwise should.

That knowledge may come as a surprise to us, since it does not correspond altogether with what is very often thought to be the manner in which the prayer-life usually develops and the consequences which such development entails. I say, 'usually,' because, of course, there are exceptions; not every one travels by the same way. There is a fairly straight and level road from Feldkirch, on the western frontier of what was Austria, to Innsbruck; but any one may go by other ways in spite of the fact that almost every Austrian who is asked the way will point to the one main road. It is the main road of prayer which we are considering, that which the great spiritual guides point

out to us. We shall not go all the way with them, but only up to a certain ascent in the way which any Christian who is persevering will probably reach, and which presents difficulties of a different character from those already encountered.

It is commonly imagined that prayer ought to become, and will become, easier by practice, in something of the way that playing the piano or speaking a foreign language does; that progress in prayer depends upon doing the same things in the same way although with more facility and pleasure. This is true up to a point, at and beyond which there is a distinct change, often unexpected and consequently disturbing. The way, instead of going on very much as it has, seems to come to an end, and it is of the first importance that we should know why this happens, what it means, and what we ought to do. For unless we have this knowledge we may easily fall into discouragement, endure a good deal of unnecessary suffering, waste our time and energy, and even give up the attempt to progress in prayer.

The situation we may find ourselves in is this. We have been persevering in the practice of mental prayer, have benefited greatly by it, gained much knowledge of, and love for, the things of that world of spiritual realities into which it has enabled us to penetrate and to make our own. It has not been without difficulties, but we have been taught how to recognize them and deal with them. The Mysteries of the Faith have become clearer to us, more certain and more powerful in our lives. We had only to go on, we thought, and all this would be intensified, the way more open, the light stronger, prayer both easier and more of a delight. But instead everything seems to have gone wrong, the way narrowed down to a cul-de-sac, the light fading, meditation becoming impossible, in fact we hardly seem capable of praying at all, though we still want to pray, and we begin to wonder whether we are losing our faith. Nothing we may try to do seems to work, the things that used to help are almost meaningless, no longer the realities they were. We try to meditate and pray, but

get nowhere, and on seeking advice may be told that the only thing to do is to make ourselves go on doing what, indeed, we should like to, but simply cannot do.

Now, of course, all this might be a consequence of our own fault, such as the neglect of a necessary self-discipline, the allowing of venial sins and imperfections to go on unchecked, too little attempt to bridge the gap between prayer and conduct, over-solicitude about temporal affairs and so on. Or some part of it might be due to ill health, mental or physical, or to some extraordinary circumstance affecting our life. So the first thing to do is to examine ourselves in order to discover whether what has happened is due to anything in ourselves, and if so, to set about correcting whatever it may be. In so examining our conscience we must look for something definite, the fact of our sinfulness in general is not in question.

Suppose, then, that we have done this and cannot accuse ourselves of anything which, at least, we are not sorry for and are not trying to amend. The next thing is to see

that what has happened is, in fact, what we ought to have expected. For what have we said is the essence of prayer? The desire for God Himself. What is the end toward which prayer should tend? Union with God in a loving conformity of our minds and wills to His. And why are all the things and practices of religion given to us? To enable us to be so conformed to God that we may come to that vision and possession of Him which is our perfection and eternal delight. 'We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.' 'When I awake up after Thy likeness, I shall be satisfied with it.' Further, what is it that we have apparently lost? Everything but the desire for God. We cannot meditate, that is, we cannot *think* or use our other faculties as we used to at our times of prayer, although we can do so outside prayer. The distinct and clear ideas of divine things which were such a help are so no longer. Aridity has so succeeded to sensible consolation that we appear to derive no good from trying to pray. Words fail us, since words are the expression of thoughts, and we can-

not think. Distractions increase, or at least are more noticeable and disturbing. Yet, in spite of all this, we do want God, and even amidst all these new experiences and difficulties, nothing is more dear to us or more desired by us than to be with Him and to do His will.

If only we could be sure that this change in our prayer is an advance and not, as it appears, a going back. Well, given that it is as we have described it, it is an advance and not a full stop; an entry into a higher stage of prayer which demands another kind of activity than the one we have been exercising.

What has happened is this. In all true prayer two things are operating, man's activity and God's grace. From the outset it is God Who prompts us to pray and Who on our response leads us in the way of prayer which He would have us follow. At first and for some time God treats us as the children and beginners that we are, makes the lessons attractive, gives us sensible consolations and delight in prayer, teaches us by

means of ideas and pictures, formed in our imagination, of divine realities, inspires us with strength to overcome our difficulties and to persevere. So we grow in the knowledge of God and of His will, but at the same time we are very liable to lose sight of the fact that the lessons and delight, the ideas and pictures, good as they are for a time, are not God Himself, to Whom all the things of religion are meant to bring us. And if this happens we are in danger of mistaking means for the end, and of becoming attached to things and practices rather than to God. That which should lead us to God may then become a hindrance from closer union with Him.

We are probably quite unconscious of this, and since we do desire God and persevere in using the means He has given us, we do make progress and acquire by our various acts of prayer and devotion the habit and spirit of prayer. We grow up a little out of our childhood state, become ready to be moved from the kindergarten or preparatory school to the high school of prayer. This involves

a great change, such as has been described. The lessons and practice we have had have done all they could do for us, they have helped us to arrive at this new stage in our life of prayer, which is actually a continuation although it seems like an end. A new activity is asked of us, one of greater faith and more complete surrender to the work of God.

Greater faith. To understand this we must see that faith is most truly faith when it has nothing to lean upon but God Himself. It is a mistake to think that our faith is strongest when it is evoked and supported either by outside things, as, for instance, a stirring sermon, a great religious function, or the singing of hymns, or by the emotions aroused within us during prayer in which we experience a good deal of sensible devotion. No, faith is strongest when we are in the dark, when both exterior things and interior feelings give us no succour, when we look round and there is nothing—but God.

A more complete surrender. So far we

have been largely occupied in the surrender of bad habits and the acquiring of good ones, and in a very active use of our spiritual faculties in seeking after God in the way of mental prayer. Now we are called to a surrender of that particular use of our mind, will, imagination, and memory, to an activity of the receiving of the more immediate and more powerful work of God within the soul. This is the reason why we find ourselves unable to meditate in the old way, so that we cannot think or form ideas in our prayer. Since, too, as we have said, we have probably become too much attached to, and dependent upon, such ideas and mental pictures, as well as to any sensible devotion we may have had, these are taken away by God in order that we may truly 'live by faith, not by sight'; live upon God, not upon things or feelings, however good they may be. From the incapacity to meditate and the withdrawal of sensible devotion arise a great dryness in prayer, a sense of doing nothing and a good deal of distraction. There is also a feeling of being in the dark, of obscurity,

which is both painful and unexpected. Surely, we think, if we were coming nearer to God there would be more light, not less. But the fact is that there *is* more light, and it is precisely because of this greater intensity of that light which God is, that the soul is blinded and unable to see clearly for a time. It is a similar experience to that of going out of a dark room into the blazing sunlight in which our eyes are blinded for a moment by the unaccustomed excess of light. Or something akin to that stunning effect which comes from the sudden sight of magnificent, widespread, snow-covered mountain peaks at which we can only remain silent, wonderingly worshipful before such beauty.

So is it in this new state of prayer ; not only do thoughts and words fail, so utterly inadequate are they, but the whole experience is of so spiritual and delicate a nature that it makes no impression upon the senses, nor can the soul even understand what is going on. An English writer of the fourteenth century says of this, 'At the first thou findest but a darkness, and as it were a *cloud of unknowing*, thou

knowest not what, saving that thou feelest in thy will a naked intent unto God. . . . So thou mayest neither see Him clearly by light of understanding in thy reason, nor feel Him in sweetness of love in thy affection.'

Since hardly any delusion is easier than delusion about our spiritual state, it is most necessary that we should know what signs there are which indicate that this state is of God. They are the incapacity to meditate, the inability to profit by clear ideas and pictures, coupled with a lack of desire to seek satisfaction in worldly things, and, despite all the strangeness and anxiety which accompany the beginning of this stage, a great desire to be with God in prayer. This last, especially, ratifies the others.

The entering into this new way of prayer, called by some spiritual guides the Night of Faith, takes place gradually. There is, it might be said, a preliminary period of twilight, a transition state in which ordinary mental prayer is possible at times, and when this is so it must be practised. We

should, therefore, continue to have a subject for use if needed, at the same time letting it go when God leads us to occupy ourselves in a quiet, loving attention to Him. But we are not to force ourselves to meditate when we find it possible to remain in this surrendered state, even though we may seem to be doing nothing. It is not the time for doing, but for receiving; and for that, says one of the saints, 'when we pray we should be as empty vessels before God, into which His grace may be poured drop by drop if He so wills, and, too, we should be as ready to go away with our vessel empty as if it had been filled to the brim.' Of course we never shall go away really empty, but we may at times appear to do so.

That feeling of doing nothing must not be allowed to deceive us. Actually there is no such state; we are either quietly 'waiting upon God,' to use a lovely Old Testament phrase, or attending to something else, probably ourselves and our own feelings. And when the latter is the case we must return simply and quietly to God.

We must not expect anything to happen in any perceptible manner, or we may easily fall into delusions. But we must have a strong faith that something *is* happening in our innermost spirit, the effect of which will manifest itself in our whole life, though even there we may perceive little of it. To let our light shine before men, as our Lord bids us, does not imply that we shall be very conscious of our possession of it. The saints did not think themselves—much less know themselves—to be saints.

Although this development in our prayer-life will affect the way in which we regard and practise all the rest of our religion, it will not, and must not, cause us to cease any of the ordinary practices, or in any way to look down upon them as if we were superior beings who did not need them. This was one of the errors of Quietism, and is a possible temptation to any one. Nor must we imagine that we are freed from the danger of being beset by even the most common temptations: 'Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.'

Our whole conduct in this kind of prayer consists in keeping ourselves in a state of receptivity, a simple, loving, and desiring attention to God, an ever-increasing surrender to His will. This is by no means easy, and we must be prepared to practise it until it becomes a habit. We are only at the beginning of a new phase in the life of prayer, and must be content to go quietly and slowly without any backward glances or dwelling upon ourselves. Hitherto we have been occupied in getting rid of things which hindered the growth of our spiritual life, and there is still much to be done about this. But now comes the more difficult work of getting rid of self, or more exactly, of yielding ourselves to God that He may purify and heal the faculties of the higher part of the soul, the mind and will, illuminate with His divine light the purely spiritual side of our nature, and re-order and bring into one balanced whole the disordered faculties of our being, that the divine image may be recreated within to be capable of that union with God which is the perfection of our lives.

We have but one being and one life in which to come to that end, and that life must grow and change as it grows from Christian childhood to maturity. The state of prayer, with the necessary discipline and detachment which must accompany it, is a stage in that growth which, seen and accepted, will do more for us than those which went before and prepared the way for it. That preparation is necessary, nor must we think that it may be skipped or that we can force ourselves into a more advanced state. Our spiritual life can only grow naturally, as God wills and aids our endeavour to love and serve Him. We are not to worry about our growth or want to see it, it is sufficient that we pay attention to, and use, the things by which we grow and advance toward God. The more we do this, the more we become capable of profiting by the light and grace which He bestows upon us in order that out of weakness we may be made strong and constant lovers of God, out of darkness may become 'light in the Lord,' out of our servitude may be brought into

the 'glorious liberty of the children of God,'
out of every far-off glimpse of the Divine
Beauty and Love rise to a more ordered,
more Christian, more saintly life.

BV

1259888

215

Frost

.F9

Prayer for all Chris-
tians.

JUL 13 39

JUN 24 40

OCT 4 40

MAY 15 41

MAY 5 42

JUL 13 43

JUL 13 44

AUG 20 1941

9/30/88

DEC 25 1988

St. Paul University

SHIFT LIBRARY

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
LIBRARY



10 098 196